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Commissioner's Letter



My first priority as the Northern Development Commissioner was to travel throughout the northern region to meet with mayors and municipal administrators, resource industry leaders, chambers of commerce, First Nations leaders and anyone who contacted me about projects that had employment and economic development potential. These meetings helped identify ways government can assist economic development by recognizing community priorities, co-ordinating development efforts and forming regional strategies to attract investment.

Most residents of communities scattered throughout this vast geographic region acknowledge that there needs to be willingness to adapt and change in the ways we make our living. The major natural resource industries are affected by decisions made by foreign governments, multinational corporations, and major economic drivers, such as the London Metals Exchange, the International Monetary Fund, and currency fluctuations, that are beyond the control of the provincial government, yet affect directly how industries can operate and manage.

The reality is that the northern economy will continue to be based on natural resources. The difference will be in finding new uses for these resources. A prominent example is the strong interest in the softwood lumber industry for developing value-added product potential. New fish and agricultural products are also being developed, and tourism is increasing as Canadians and international travellers discover the attractions of wilderness areas.

I also saw the extent of community pride and determination to diversify. The problems currently facing attempts to diversify local economies are not insurmountable; instead, they represent challenges to overcome. Region-wide, there is a need for less dependency on outside financing and more support from financial institutions operating in the North. Venture capital investments in the North have been modest yet are essential if the northern half of the province is to become a significant economic force.

My first year was spent laying the groundwork: marshalling resources; bringing together the right people; and assisting new businesses. In some cases, this was all that was needed to move ventures ahead. In others, we will need to continue to work on ways to help move projects forward.

Created by the demand of northern residents, who, at the Premier's summit on Northern Jobs and Development held in Prince George in October 1997, said they wanted an advocate who had a strong voice in Victoria, the Northern Development Commission has been an agency capable of "made-in-the-North" solutions - designed by northerners, driven by northerners, and located, directed and managed in the North. Our first year in operation was just the beginning.

We must recognize major economic shifts take years, and sometimes decades, to become established, and I believe northerners realize this. We need a receptive attitude to change; investment; access to global markets; a skilled labour force; and supporting suppliers and services to move ahead and diversify the economy of the North. Each of us plays a role in shaping our future in the North. The Northern Development Commission is here to help realize the opportunities for the future.



John Backhouse

Call to Action

Northern Development Commission operations— policy and program development

Goals

The Northern Development Act was passed June 30, 1998. Under the act, the Northern Development Commission's responsibilities are:

- to act as an advocate for northern economic development;
- to promote private-sector investments in northern British Columbia;
- to work with and support economic development activities of other organizations; and,
- to create jobs.

Participation

1 The commissioner is a member of the Western Canadian Corridors and Ports Initiative. This is a project of the four western provinces and the Northwest Territories. Participants include representatives of the federal government, private-sector transportation companies and educational institutions. The objective is to develop a network of transportation corridors and ports in Western Canada to allow maximum economic growth and prosperity.

2 The Northern Development Commission participated in development of the Cassiar Land and Resource Management Plan. The commission's role is to advise and ensure that economic development strategies adopted co-ordinate with and uphold other initiatives.

3 The Northern Development Commission also liaises with the North Central Municipal Association, a consortium of the villages, towns, districts, regional districts and cities across northern British Columbia. The NCMA adopts policy resolutions which are then advanced to the Union of B.C. Municipalities (UBCM), the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) and provincial and federal governments as appropriate.

4 The Northern Mayors' Task Force, formed in December 1998 to enhance the regional economy, looked to the commissioner to facilitate a number of meetings at the ministerial and senior level of bureaucracy. These were pivotal to securing funds to complete essential health care facility capital projects, and securing government assistance in sustaining the forest and mining sectors. As an example of regional advocacy, when Quesnel and Wells needed assistance with securing infrastructure funding, those communities looked to the commissioner to make representations to the Ministers of Municipal Affairs and Environment for the provision of adequate sewer and water systems and also for flood protection work for the newly incorporated community of Wells.

5 The commissioner sits as a member of the external review committee to the B.C. Knowledge Development Fund to ensure that the North gets a fair share of the funding distributed. Proposals are reviewed from public post-secondary institutions, teaching hospitals and affiliates of non-profit agencies. The committee's objectives include creating and enhancing job creation and economic development province-wide. Funding is provided for purposes such as equipment, database development and maintenance and forest research.

6. The Northwest Corridor Development Corporation invited the commissioner to become a member of the board and participate in planning the economic potential involving the road, rail, air, pipeline, telecommunications and marine facilities. Along with the Northern Alberta Development Council, the Northern Development Commission has contributed to a Northwest Corridor Capability and Opportunity Study which is expected to be completed in the fall of 1999.

7 Focussing internationally, the commissioner has proposed creation of a Northern British Columbia-Japan Investment Forum. Terms of reference are being written with the objective of organizing trade missions and establishing links for government, industry and business with a northern focal point.



Consultations

Economic Development Forum Meetings

The commissioner created three separate administrative areas and divided the northern region into geographic sections.

Communities in each of the three sections were invited to submit nominations for representatives to attend a meeting to explore economic development potential and to discuss initiatives that can be undertaken immediately. The intent was to provide networking and information sharing opportunities for economic development practitioners. The goal is to promote co-operation and ultimately develop a regional strategy for economic development and diversification.

Northeast (Dawson Creek)

Twenty-eight participants in the northeast forum identified five infrastructure issues that require being addressed to remove impediments to development. They are:

1. road development and maintenance;
2. transportation links for shipment of goods;
3. availability of education and training opportunities;
4. access to health care; and,
5. reliable telecommunications service.

Further discussion emphasized that improved telecommunications service is integral to future business development. Specifically, service that allows internet access and the flexibility of products such as call management services available in urban centres is needed. Businesses need to have private lines and access to extra lines for modem and fax use. In some areas, only party lines are available and customers experience long waits for repair service. Commissioner Backhouse has had regular contact with communications technology companies and has lobbied the CRTC on behalf of northern communities.

Strong potential exists for developing value-added agricultural products. The group expressed interest in having another forum specifically addressing the agriculture sector. The commission will undertake to mount this special seminar as requested.

The Business Development Bank was invited to attend and present information on its loan programs for start-up businesses and participants were each provided with a copy of a self-paced computer course - "Export 101" - about how to go about moving products into the international marketplace.

Northwest (Terrace)

Attracting participation region-wide, 37 participants met to discuss economic priorities for the region. In addition to the information gathered at the meeting, a survey was distributed wherein the respondents were asked to prioritize the most urgent issues.

Six top priorities for northwest economic development practitioners are:

1. the commission to continue to take leadership;
2. develop strategies and organize regular exchanges of ideas;
3. improve opportunities for local decision-making with respect to economic development and securing fairer return on income from resources extracted in the North;
4. undertake extensive tourism planning for the northwest region;
5. the commission to sponsor a seminar to encourage joint venture business development involving First Nations communities; and,
6. the commission to work to ensure that the promised upgrading of Highway 37 takes place - a vital link for business.

North-central (Prince George)

The north-central region's meeting was held in March because there was an opportunity to combine with the Go International seminar on breaking into foreign markets planned by the Council for the Advancement of Science and Technology. The north-central economic development practitioners were invited to attend the seminar on Program for Export Market Development-Investment (PEMD-I) developed by the federal Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.

The 28 participants discussed the commission's plans to establish partnerships with municipalities for the purpose of encouraging economic development and creating job opportunities.

Feedback from the meeting included:


1. the need for better transportation and communications infrastructure in remote and rural areas;
2. assistance to promote destinations and to establish desirable tourist facilities is needed to support the potential for tourism development; and,
3. access to outside and possibly world markets is essential for businesses in small communities.

Overall, reaction and comment from each of the meetings was very positive. Participants expressed a desire to meet regularly and have the commission provide the leadership in organizing of future meetings.

Liaison with Economic Development Practitioners

An important function in encouraging business development and job creation has been the commissioner's role in heightening the interactions among those most directly involved in economic development work. His involvement has served to increase the level of co-operation with the agencies and individuals involved.

Over the past year, the Northern Development Commission has actively encouraged interaction with economic development officers, mayors and administrators, the community futures offices, chambers of commerce and financial institutions. Overall, the outcome has been a network of referrals that has produced efficiencies for those seeking to establish or expand their businesses.



Northern Development Commission

— Making it Happen

Agriculture

Economic issue

In the northeast, a study funded to identify potential value-added agricultural products is expected to be filed in the near future. From there, the most viable possibilities will be chosen for development.

Crop potential currently is being investigated for pine mushrooms with a view to eventual development of the lower value portion of the harvest. There is employment potential for factory production of dried, canned and sliced product manufactured here for export to Asia Pacific.

Our role

A request came to the commission from a Vanderhoof food-processing plant to assist in securing financial assistance to allow expansion and market development. Required advice was provided and referrals were made during the company's development stage. The company has since expanded.

The Fort Nelson Farmers' Institute approached the commission to lobby the government on farm land stumpage fees. The commission facilitated a review of the issue by the Select Standing Committee on Agriculture. As a result of the commissioner's work, a decision was made to conduct public meetings during the fall of 1999.

The commission has been actively involved in working with the Northwest Corridor Association and the Western Canadian Corridors and Ports Initiative. The goal is to reduce the cost of grain transportation to port and increase utilization of the northwest transportation facilities and ports in response to the requirements of western grain handlers.



Fishing

Economic issue

Individual companies are attempting to identify a saleable marine product in the non-fin fish line which is not currently being sold from the northcoast.

Our role

The commission supported this effort by funding a marketing study. Since then, two projects have been approved through the Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks, and the proponents have identified assistance with marketing analysis as integral to obtaining the required approvals.

The commission supported a study to determine potential viability of a commercial shellfish farm for the northcoast and Queen Charlotte Islands. This was part of a larger marketing study on shifting the fishing economy to the bivalve fishery.

Future direction

Some westcoast entrepreneurs have also sought the commissioner's assistance in examining the potential for finfish aquaculture. This involves exploration of lifting the moratorium on seafarm development. Investigation and consideration is ongoing.

Economic issue

The commission took an advocacy stance with the CRTC to bring improved infrastructure to the northern region. In addition, Commissioner Backhouse brought the lack of infrastructure to the attention of federal and provincial officials to encourage expediting service into high-cost areas.

Our role

Acting as an advocate for northern communities, the commission has monitored developments in the telecommunications industry and actively promoted upgrades to party lines and provision of enhanced services in remote areas. There has also been promotion for expansion of PLNet, a program involved in information access through the world wide web for provincial schools and communities.

Results

An earth station has been installed at Telegraph Creek as a pilot project. The Telegraph Trail Society approached the commissioner and his advocacy role with the provincial and federal governments was significant in bringing the project to fruition. People in that remote community now have cost-effective access to high-technology communications. Satellite feeds now provide internet access.

As of August 1999, technology grants provided to school districts in northern B.C. for acquiring computer hardware, software and information services totalled \$1,030,000 and a further investment to fund PLNet services to school districts of \$2.9 million and \$294,000 to northern colleges. While these allocations reflect average cost across the province, the actual cost of connecting in remote areas is higher for areas such as Telegraph Creek, Atlin, and Dease Lake requiring satellite services.





Retail

Regular inquiries come to the commission about the retail climate and potential for new retail ventures.

Economic issue

The Airport Plaza project in Prince George is progressing. The retail complex is in the design stage, with the developer preparing to go to the city of Prince George design panel for development permit approval.

Our role

The commissioner arranged meetings for the developer with local cabinet ministers, the Minister of Transportation and Highways and their officials. His involvement helped move the process forward.

“Mr. Backhouse played a key role in moving the project forward,” said developer Keith Raddatz. “He was able to quickly call, and facilitate, meetings with key senior staff in the Ministry of Transportation and Highways. He brought the project stakeholders to the table where a solution was ironed out.”

“The project was running into delays and difficulties around the costing and approvals of the off-site services — things like sewers, water, storm sewers and curbs,” said developer Ron Hyde of Rivershores Developments (1998) Ltd. “We were introduced to John Backhouse by the mayor of Vanderhoof. John was sympathetic and, through his efforts, we were able to meet senior Ministry of Transportation and Highways staff in Victoria who helped us resolve the off-site services problem.”

Economic issue

Vanderhoof Square, a shopping center in Vanderhoof currently under construction, sought assistance from the commissioner to help with issues of access.

Our role

The commissioner participated and brought about successful negotiations among the Ministry of Transportation and Highways, the developer and the municipality. The developer credits the commissioner's involvement as integral to obtaining agreement from all parties and allowing the project to proceed.

Economic issue

The developer of the Canadian Tire franchise in Quesnel approached the commissioner for assistance in approaching the Ministry of Transportation and Highways. The project required development of a formula for cost sharing the intersection signalization off Highway 97.

Our role

The commissioner established contacts and meetings and the issue was resolved satisfactorily.



Economic issue

During the planning and introduction of the Canadian Wood Council's Wood WORKSI program, the commissioner arranged discussions among cabinet ministers and senior officials. His work was instrumental in bringing about the desired result - a "Build With Wood" strategy which was adopted by the province. The commitment to using wood in B.C. capital projects is expected to create 400 full-time jobs a year.

One of the first results of this policy was the decision to support construction, using mainly wood, of the Hart Middle School in Prince George - the first publicly funded project built under the new strategy. Various municipalities and regional districts have subsequently adopted similar policies on wood use in construction.

Our role

The commissioner is credited by Wood WORKSI for establishing their positive relationship with the provincial government, leading to adoption of the building strategy.

Economic issue

The Touch Wood symposium held in Houston attracted 200 delegates interested in exchanging information on value-added wood products and services.

Our role

The commission provided financial support to the project due to its focus on future job creation.



Small Business

Economic issue

When a proponent put forward the idea of establishing a full motion pilot training flight in northern British Columbia, the commissioner, the ministries of Finance and Advanced Education examined the business case and the potential for job creation.

Our role

The commissioner facilitated discussions and provided partial funding for the study concerning the benefits of having a flight simulator located in northern British Columbia. The outcome so far is that the decision to move the project further will require private-sector leadership. Discussions continue among the stakeholders.

During the period of federal government devolution of air transportation authority, a number of issues arose which the commission was able to assist in resolving; notably, the issue of land transfer. At the time, the commissioner was able to support negotiations between the town of Fort Nelson and the B.C. Assets and Land Corporation.

While the concept of value-added crosses all economic sectors, it is prominent in the forest industry. The commission has assisted inquiries about product development, production and marketing. The commission has contributed staff resources to the Central Interior Wood Processors Association's efforts towards creation of the Northern Wood Technology Centre. Additionally, the commissioner has participated in all the planning meetings and discussions.

Northern Development Commission

— Advocate for the Future

Energy

- On the request of the mayors of Smithers and Houston, the commission brought together the parties potentially involved in a congeneration project in Houston. As a result of the Commissioner's involvement, BC Hydro has undertaken further analysis of the project's future viability. The communities got a hearing from BC Hydro and all stakeholders are gratified with the direction and momentum resulting from that meeting and acknowledge the commissioner's contribution to restoring some optimism for carrying the project forward.





Forestry

- The Northern Wood Technology Centre, proposed to be established in Prince George and located at the College of New Caledonia, is poised to make a significant contribution to the viability and sustainability of the secondary wood manufacturing industry. The centre is being planned to provide high-technology training and to encourage technology transfer and development of the value-added sector of the forest economy. The commissioner has been an active member of the steering committee working towards creation of the centre.
- On the request of the minister of Forests, the commissioner chaired a public meeting to invite input on Slokan Forest Products' request for amendments to Pulpwood Agreement No. 12 in the Fort St. John forest district. The commissioner held private meetings with interested parties and other forest industry companies, chaired the public meeting, and submitted a report for the Minister's consideration.
- The commissioner has spent considerable time bringing together various stakeholders in the Nass timber supply area to maximize future employment opportunities and to sustain present employment levels.



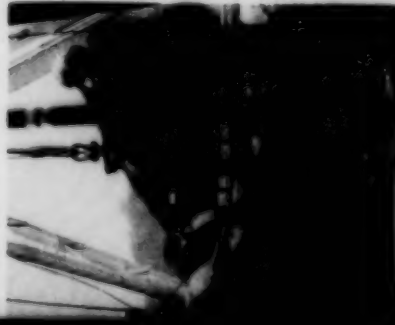
Manufacturing

- An American company has expressed interest in establishing a petrochemical plant in Prince George. To encourage the company to locate in Prince George, the commissioner arranged meetings with the Prince George Regional Development Corporation, the mayor of Prince George and with Dan Miller, minister responsible for northern development.



Mining

- Western Canadian Coal Corp. is looking to develop three coal mines in northeastern British Columbia by the year 2003. To date, interest has concentrated on Chetwynd and Tumbler Ridge. The commissioner arranged a meeting between the company president and government representatives. It also provided funding to the district of Tumbler Ridge to develop a Web site that will be used as a marketing tool.



Oil and Gas

- There is renewed interest in the potential for lifting the moratorium and developing offshore oil and gas near Prince Rupert as a means of diversifying the local economy. The Conflict Managers Group, consultants which specialize in issue analysis, has been contracted by the Northern Development Commission to assess the public interest and obtain input from all the stakeholders involved. The group will recommend whether there is sufficient will and ability to go forward and build an appropriate process to examine the moratorium issue.
- The Husky Oil Refinery in Prince George asked the commissioner to support an exemption from environmental standards that is imposed by the federal government. The commissioner has been involved with private-sector representatives and the City of Prince George, Regional District of Fraser-Fort George and Prince George Airport in working on this ongoing effort. The commissioner also made a presentation to the provincial Environment Minister on behalf of Husky Oil.
- In concert with the provincial government's commitment to highways infrastructure, there is a full scale upgrade and maintenance schedule on the Sierra-Yoyo-Desan Road, the majority of which was formerly a privately operated and maintained road. This road is essential to the continued success of the oil and gas industry and other resource industries in north-eastern B.C. Following a site visit Commissioner Backhouse joined with local government and industry in advocating for road improvements. An agreement was reached whereby the costs associated with improvements will be recovered from industrial users while the province will share the costs of maintenance.

— The commission has ongoing liaison with the office of the oil and gas commissioner and works in concert with his efforts to assist the industry. There has been a very good, co-operative working relationship established. An example has been development of the Aboriginal Contractors' Registry. The registry is designed to increase First Nation participation in the oil and gas and other resource sectors. It will also provide a vehicle for aboriginal contractors to develop the skills and other requirements to take advantage of industry and government contracts. The registry resulted directly from co-operation between the two commissions, industry and local contractors. The Northern Development Commission also lent its support to Oil and Gas Week held in Fort St. John during May 1999.



Tourism

- Interest has intensified in developing Valemount as a destination resort because of the federally imposed moratorium on any further development at Jasper. The commission assisted the village by contributing towards a feasibility study on building an air tram for sightseers and skiers. Valemount regularly invites the commission's participation in actively pursuing development of corresponding accommodation and dining facilities and a variety of tourist attractions.
- The commissioner's assistance was sought by a resort owner and the Tourist Info Centre to aid in approaching the Highways Minister for improving access to the tourist centre at the junction of Highways 16 and 97 for westbound traffic. Numerous other towns have sought assistance in attracting tourist development. The commission has responded, as appropriate, with financial assistance for marketing studies or by making referrals.

Financial Records

*Community Projects Funded in 1998/99 and 1999/00
Totalling \$154,650*

Peace Region Value-Added Strategy Group. Contribution to help fund a joint project with the government of Alberta to investigate the potential for developing and marketing value-added agricultural products in the Peace region.

Corporation of the Village of Valemount. Contribution to conduct a feasibility study on the business potential for a ski development for Canoe Mountain.

Skeena-Queen Charlotte Regional District. Contribution towards development of a marketing plan for selling shellfish through the port of Prince Rupert.

District of Tumbler Ridge. Contribution towards design and creation of a web site to seek an investor for development of a third coal mine in Tumbler Ridge.

District of Tumbler Ridge. Contribution towards a comprehensive marketing study exploring the potential for economic development and revitalization of the community.

Gitanyow Hereditary Chiefs. Contribution towards a feasibility study to explore creation of a processing plant for pine mushrooms.

Gitanyow Hereditary Chiefs. Contribution towards a feasibility study to explore creation of a post- and beam-construction facility in Gitanyow Village.

District of Stewart. Contribution towards a cost-benefit analysis on the timber sold from the Nass Valley.

Northwest Corridor Development Corporation. Contribution to analyze development potential.

City of Fort St. John. Support of Oil & Gas Week to develop community and industry strategies to meet the challenges of continued industry growth.

Touch Wood 1999 Northern Wood Forum. Contribution towards the costs of mounting the meeting in Houston.

Cariboo Economic Action Forum. Contribution to mounting the event in Williams Lake.

Ventures and Value-Added Seminar. Contribution to the meeting in Burns Lake.

Northwest Rail Cruise Tourism Forum. Contribution as sponsor of half the forum costs in partnership with the BC Rail Group of Companies.

Council for the Advancement of Science and Technology. Donation to mount the Go International! seminar in Prince George on global marketing.

Angus Reid Group. Grant in support of a survey of grain transportation stakeholders in partnership with the western provinces.

Note: The listing of grants and contributions covers two fiscal years and therefore will not coincide with the totals in the statement following.

Statement of Expenditures 1998-99

Salaries/benefits	\$368,000
Operating costs	\$426,100
Grants	\$29,400
Contributions	\$68,500

Note: This report covers the first year of operation from the inception July 17, 1998 to July 16, 1999.

The government's fiscal year runs April 1 to March 31; therefore expenditures have been drawn from two budgets.



Summary of Professional Services Contracted 1998-99 and 1999-00

Pacific Business Research. \$5,000 for training sessions on export development.

Buchan Public Affairs. \$40,000 for communications services.

Conflict Managers Group. \$96,000 for conducting a feasibility study assessing public interest in a process to study the existing moratorium on offshore oil and natural gas.

V.S. Pendakur, Inc. Transportation Planning and Engineering Consultants. \$20,000 for development and implementation of a northern economic development strategy.

KPMG. \$9,000 for analysis of the commission's business plan and accountability structure.

McNeal and Associates. \$24,000 for assessment of the business case for a flight-training simulator.



Participation

Northern Development Commission participation in regional, provincial and national conferences.

September 28-October 1, 1998	UBCM, Penticton, B.C.
October 6-9, 1998	Key Ideas, Community Futures Development Corporation, Prince George, B.C.
November 29- December 2, 1998	Meet the North, Build a Vision, Edmonton, Alberta
November 8-9, 1998	B.C. Business Summit, Vancouver, B.C.
January 5-9, 1999	Siralli Enterprise Facilitation Course, Vancouver, B.C.
January 25-26, 1999	Farm 2000, Richmond, B.C.
January 27-29, 1999	Cordilleron Exploration Roundup, Vancouver, B.C.
February 17-20, 1999	Winter Cities Forum, Prince George, B.C.
March 9-10, 1999	Western Economic Development Ministers' Meeting, Edmonton, Alberta
March 12, 1999	1999 Government Conference, Edmonton, Alberta
March 26-27, 1999	Science Serves the North, Prince George, B.C.
April 8-9, 1999	Northern Forest Products' Association Convention, Prince George, B.C.

April 9-11, 1999	.....	<i>1999 Conference on Coastal Communities</i> , Vancouver, B.C.
April 22-24, 1999	.....	<i>Touch Wood Conference</i> , Houston, B.C.
April 28-May 1, 1999	.....	<i>Rural Forum</i> , Brandon, Manitoba
April 29-May 1, 1999	.....	<i>North Central Municipal Association Annual General Meeting</i> , Dawson Creek, B.C.
May 12-14, 1999	.....	<i>Premier's Summit on Economic Opportunity</i> , Cariboo-Chilcaltin, 108 Mile, B.C.
May 12-14, 1999	.....	<i>Minerals North</i> , Stewart, B.C.
May 27-28, 1999	.....	<i>Oil & Gas Week</i> , Fort St. John, B.C.

Future Directions and Projects

Already, some issues have come to the fore indicating the level and nature of involvement expected from the commission in future.

- In October 1999, the commission is sponsoring the Sea Food Expo in Prince Rupert, planned to showcase products and new processing techniques for the northeast coast.
- There is ongoing involvement by the commissioner with stakeholders in the Nass timber supply area assisting in identifying means to reduce the cost of logging in a low-value timber area.
- Respecting the upgrades and repairs to 140 kilometers of the Liard Highway (Highway 77), the commissioner will continue to work actively with the stakeholders to improve highway access. He also is involved in developing a tourism strategy for the North working with Tourism BC and the Ministry of Small Business, Tourism and Culture.
- Once the issue of whether there should be a process concerning the offshore oil and gas moratorium is decided, and a course of action identified, there may be ongoing involvement with that sector.
- There is recognition of the importance of electronic infrastructure which the province has supported through projects such as PLNet and the CAP pilot projects. The western premiers gave a mandate to the territorial government of the Yukon to lead a project to support services to rural and remote entrepreneurs. The commission will continue to advocate on behalf of communities with the CRTC, federal and provincial governments and service providers.